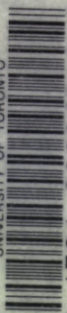


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Nicolson, Benedict  
Vermeer: Lady at the  
virginals

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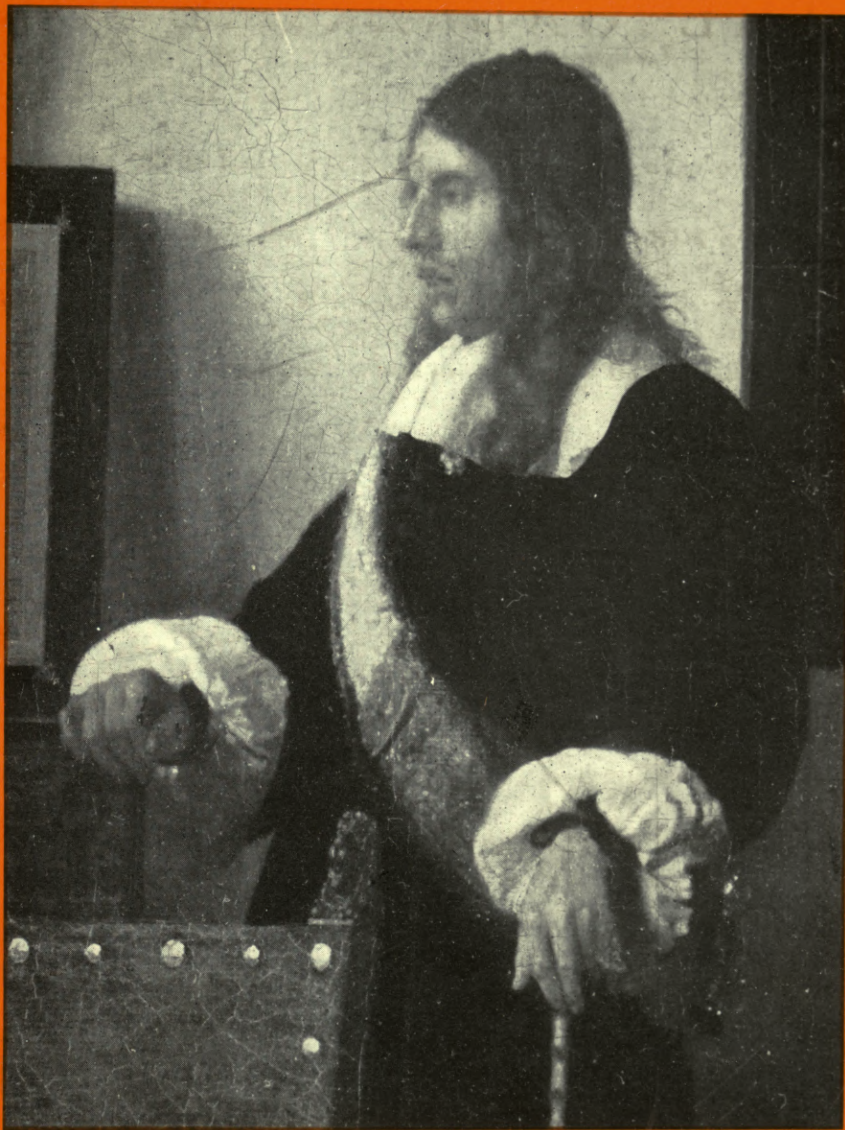








# VERMEER



## LADY AT THE VIRGINALS

WITH 15 ILLUSTRATIONS AND AN INTRODUCTION BY BENEDICT NICOLSON

GALLERY BOOKS

NUMBER 12



# THE GALLERY BOOKS

are intended to serve a three-fold purpose: first of all they are meant to encourage the general public to look at the great masterpieces of art more closely, and thus to find in them new and more rewarding beauties. By this means the reader will not only become better acquainted with each individual work of art, but also attain a better comprehension of the aims and methods of its creator and of art as the highest expression of human thought and emotion. At the same time he may be prompted to realize to what extent works of art are in fact products of the social and cultural conditions of their time. Apart from this specific purpose, these books, in their selected reproductions of details, offer to all lovers of art a means of keeping fresh and intensifying the impressions received from the original itself. Finally, the student of art history will find gathered here material for study not otherwise easily accessible.

The introductions to the books try to give the gist of all that is known about each work and its relation to the age in which it was created.

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EDITOR:

PAUL WENGRAF

VERMEER  
LADY AT THE VIRGINALS

IN THE ROYAL COLLECTION · LONDON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
BENEDICT NICOLSON  
AND FIFTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS



THE GALLERY BOOKS No. 12

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1 *Lady at the Virginals*, by VERMEER  
Canvas:  $28\frac{1}{2} \times 24\frac{1}{2}$  inches

Royal Collection, Buckingham Palace  
By gracious permission of His Majesty The King

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# VERMEER'S "LADY AT THE VIRGINALS"

by

BENEDICT NICOLSON

NO TWO DESCRIPTIONS of the Vermeer in the Royal Collection ever seem to tally. We find it referred to in catalogues as "The Music Lesson", though there is nothing to indicate that a lesson is in progress. A man is listening to music being played with a blank expression on his face not proper in an instructor. At times it is labelled "A lady at the virginals and a gentleman listening", or alternatively "A young woman playing on the harpsichord" or "Standing at the spinet"—without much respect for the nomenclature of Flemish musical instruments. Whatever may be going on in the background, the real subject of this picture is the still-life of a room. As we would expect to find in the living-room of a well-to-do Dutch family about 1660 when the picture was painted, the furniture is sensible, solid, and thoroughly uncomfortable. A table covered by a Turkey carpet takes up considerable space in the foreground, and chairs are disposed about the room like properties in a stage setting. Two walls only of the room are visible, and on the wall opposite the spectator hang a mirror and a picture, the latter cut in half and so deeply immersed in shadow that its subject cannot quite be determined. On its black frame just above the earthenware jug, Vermeer has inscribed his name: J. V. Meer, with the letters J.V. and M. in the form of a monogram.

On the floor lies a viola da gamba, and at the back of the room against the wall stands a noble and gaily-coloured instrument called the virginal. In Blount's "Glossographia" of 1656, we read: "Virginal (virginalis), maidenly, virgin-like, hence the name of that musical instrument called Virginals, because maids and virgins do most commonly play on them". The soundboard and flap are decorated with printed papers forming a conventionalised design of flowers, sprays of foliage and sea-horses (Fig. 13). The lid is tilted back on a thin strut to reveal a Latin inscription in classical lettering: "*Musica Letitiæ Comes Medicina Dolorum*"\*—music is the companion of joy, the medicine of grief. An

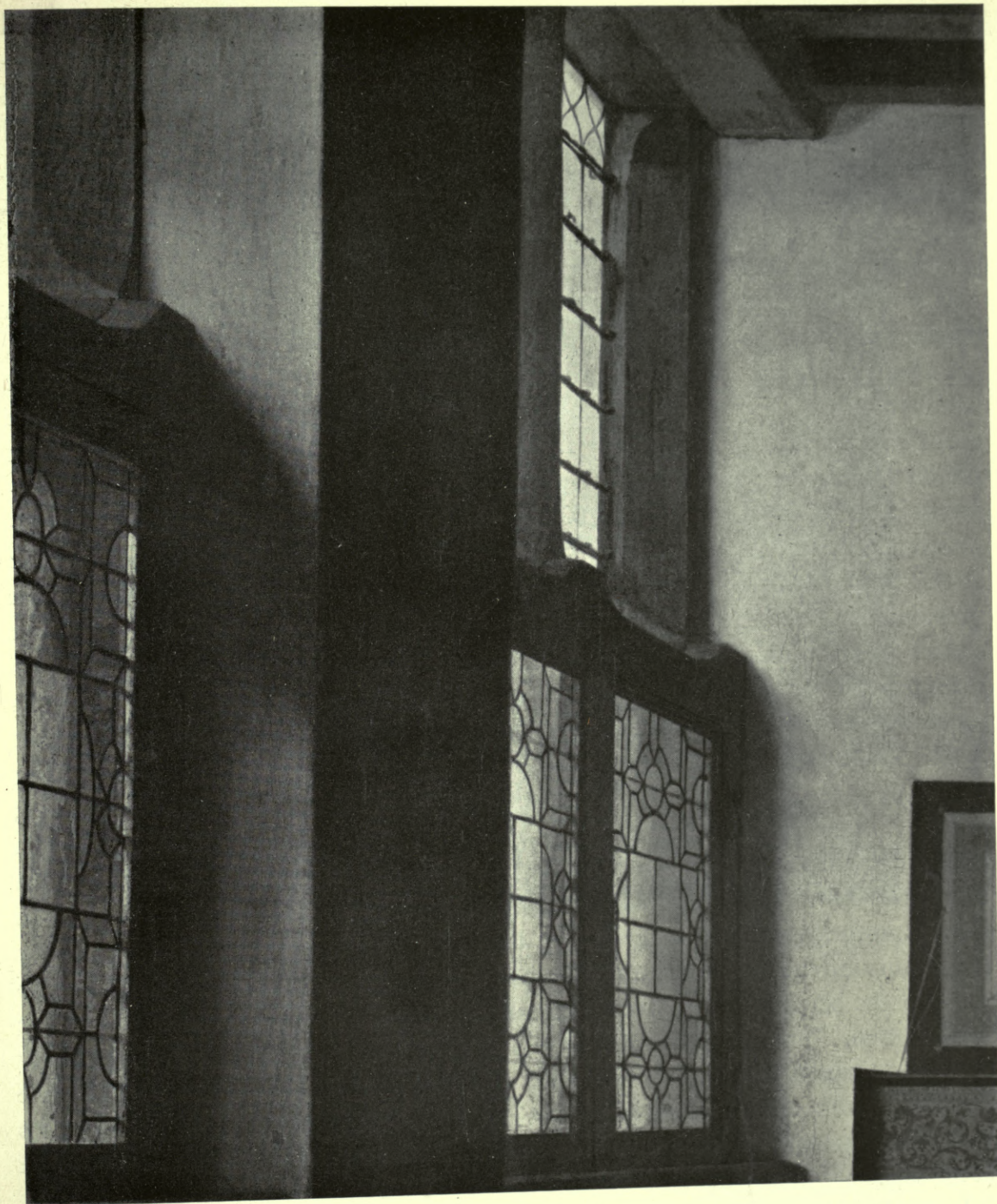
\*The last word, partly hidden by the lady's shoulder, is always interpreted *Doloris* in the singular, but the same inscription ending with the word *Dolorum* appears on two instruments by Andries Ruckers the elder, one in the Musée Archéologique in Bruges (1624), the other belonging to Miss B. Skinner of Holyoke, Mass. (1640).



almost identical instrument is preserved in the Musée Instrumental du Conservatoire in Brussels (Fig. 15), bearing the date 1620 and signed by Andries Ruckers the elder, a member of a famous family of designers of keyboard instruments in Antwerp. The Brussels instrument has the same hand-printed block paper as in the Royal picture, though the inscriptions vary and the legs of the two instruments are constructed on slightly different lines. Much the same design of printed papers appears in two pictures in the National Gallery, on the virginal in Gabriel Metsu's "Music Lesson" (Fig. 5). and on the harpsichord in Jan Steen's "Music Master". But the Ruckers family are reputed never to have designed two identical instruments. They varied the patterns on their printed papers. For the lids they chose appropriate verses from the psalms, or commissioned Dutch artists to paint them little landscapes such as we find in the two virginals introduced into Vermeer's pictures in the National Gallery.

Through heavily leaded windows on the left wall (Fig. 2), the light is diffused indiscriminately over animate and inanimate objects. No rectangle of light is allowed to creep across the chequered floor; no beam is cast on to some significant feature, because no one feature is more significant than any other. Light is not here used as with Rembrandt or Caravaggio to heighten the dramatic effect, but to describe each object whether it happens to fall in sunlight or shadow with ruthless impartiality and unerring fidelity to the surface appearance of objects in space. Relegated to the back of the room are two people, a woman playing on the virginal and a man beside her resting his hand on the corner of her instrument (Figs. 6, 7, 8). Between them no emotional contact exists. So averse is Vermeer to any suggestion of a human drama, that the lady is shown with her back to the spectator, and a hint of her appearance only reaches us from a reflection in the mirror above. In no way, neither by animated expression nor by gesture, nor by psychological tension, nor least of all by their position vis-à-vis the spectator, are these two people permitted to dominate their surroundings. The atmosphere circulates freely around them, but they remain subject to the same pictorial laws that govern the still-life on the table. For Vermeer all objects are charged with equal significance. The shadow of the ring from which the mirror hangs is worthy of as meticulous a rendering as the man's head in profile. The only consideration affecting the relative importance of objects in this picture is their apparent size, so that the inhabitants of this room, who within their four walls might reasonably lay claim to a certain authority and stature, are forced to play a subsidiary rôle proportionate to the situation they happen to occupy in space. Vermeer has adopted the same





2 Detail of Vermeer's *Lady at the Virginals*



device in his "Concert" of the Gardner Museum (Fig. 3), where the so-called subject takes place at the back of a room against a flat wall and where the foreground is taken up with empty space, a table, and two discarded musical instruments. Man in these two pictures is reduced to the level of carpets, and chairs are raised to the level of human beings. Were it not for the accepted convention that a picture in which men and women play a part must have men and women as its subject, we might have felt tempted to re-christen the Vermeer in Buckingham Palace: "An interior with figures".

If we recall for a moment how the Italian artists in the first half of the sixteenth century chose to represent concert parties and music lessons on a flat surface, we shall be struck at once by the fact that their curiosity is aroused almost exclusively by the musicians. The rooms in which guests are entertained are treated in the most perfunctory fashion, often by a dark background against which the players can disport themselves to greater advantage. Their instruments are present solely for the purpose of being played, and nothing is introduced that has not a direct bearing on the act of music-making. This is because at the time of the High Renaissance and in the first flush of Mannerism, man presided at the centre of a world designed for his own exploitation; and these scenes provide occasions more for animated group-portraiture than for the transcription of objective reality. But slowly as time passed, man lost that sense of his own pre-eminence and found his natural horizons on a humbler level. This made possible the emergence of landscape and still-life painting round about 1600 in which he was allotted a minor rôle or totally excluded; and this same relationship between man and nature predetermined to some extent the form that bourgeois genre painting was to take in Holland about fifty years later. For Vermeer's intention in this picture is to invest inanimate objects with a vital and independent existence of their own. He is moved by the beauty of the world around him and subjects its most irrelevant details to the closest scrutiny. The marbling on the floor seems too precious to be walked over. The chair with its blue upholstery may have to wait indefinitely for an occupant (Fig. 9). The viola da gamba must continue to lie on the floor, forsaken and unplayed (Fig. 11). And the earthenware jug must waste its sweetness on the bulky table, an exquisite side-show that serves no purpose (Fig. 14).

In some respects Vermeer's visual experience recalls a style of painting that flourished in certain progressive European cities during that astonishing decade from 1430 to 1440. Jan Van Eyck and "Robert Campin" succeeded in reproducing the facts of the material world with a precision that has never been



3 *Concert*, by VERMEER  
Canvas: 28 × 25 inches

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston (Mass.)

surpassed, but here the resemblance ceases. However surprising the realism of the Flemings may seem, their objects of domestic utility served only as literary or historical associations relevant to a central spiritual theme. The attitude of mind that made possible the painting of an earthenware jug, not for its utility, nor as the symbol of some spiritual conflict in man, but entirely for its own sake, finds favour for the first time in the Protestant and oligarchical civilisation of the Dutch Republic. Just as his associate, Anthony van Leeuwenhoek, devoted a life-time to the examination of tiny particles of matter under



the microscope, so Vermeer applied himself to the task of recording with magical accuracy a commonplace episode in a room in Delft.

Like Degas, who felt obliged to proceed on analagous lines some two hundred years later, but with different problems to solve, Vermeer disregards all accepted rules of composition in order that his illusion of reality should be complete and triumphant. Every so often the art of painting is rejuvenated by contact with the disorderly real world. Audaciously he sweeps all furniture and figures into the right-hand corner. If we imagine a line running down the centre of the picture, there remains nothing to the left of it but a desert of empty space almost as far into the room as the eye can penetrate. In the hands of less accomplished artists, emptiness is generally a sign of failure to fill the space, but the left-hand side of Vermeer's picture is crowded with nothing and as such strangely disturbing. Equally disturbing is the proximity of the table in the right foreground. We have only to stretch out our hand to feel the carpet sway heavily at the touch. We, the spectators, are not standing outside a transparent fourth wall, we are ourselves involved inside the room with the fourth wall behind us, and are almost surprised not to find the reflection of our feet in the mirror.

This room is not especially large, judging by the distance from floor to ceiling, and by our knowledge of the dimensions of other rooms in Delft; yet we have the sensation of watching a scene taking place at the far end of a corridor, so steep is the perspective. If we cut out the bottom of the picture and the window on the extreme left, the objects at the back of the room seem suddenly to increase in size and approach us, assuming, as we would say, "normal" proportions. This is because we naturally adjust our vision to whatever is situated at a certain distance from our eyes. But Vermeer was in the habit of sitting very close to his model and of including in the immediate foreground objects that in reality appear blurred or can only be seen by a movement of the head from side to side. Similarly, a photograph taken with a wide-angle lens of a room we know well creates vistas and imposing proportions that strike us as unfamiliar.

A clue to Vermeer's method of work is afforded by a study of the famous picture of the "Artist in his studio" from the Czernin Collection in Vienna (Fig. 4). Whether or not Vermeer by a system of reflecting mirrors has here painted his self-portrait, need not concern us. The point is that the artist represented in the picture has set his easel close to the model, proving that this was a known practice in Holland in Vermeer's day. From the Buckingham Palace picture we learn a similar lesson. That Vermeer sat down to paint it is proved by the lines of perspective that converge at a point not far from the





4 *Artist in his Studio*, by VERMEER  
Canvas:  $47\frac{1}{4} \times 39\frac{3}{8}$  inches

Czernin Collection, Vienna



lady's left elbow; and the mirror (Fig. 10) hanging on the wall contains some scraps of information of a similar kind. This mirror is tilted forward to reveal the lady's face and the marbled floor behind her, but it also shows a number of other objects, not all of which can be identified. At the top can just be seen another wall of the room; and between the wall and the table is quite clearly the base of the easel at which Vermeer worked, set at an angle to the walls of the room and hence to the picture plane as in the Vienna "Studio", with its slat of wood holding the picture in place and projecting, again as in Vienna, beyond the easel legs. These facts are interesting in themselves, as they afford an insight into the mind and habits of an enigmatical man. They also provide an additional reason for believing that Vermeer sat only a few yards from the table to paint this picture. But of his own person we learn nothing, not even the toe of his boot protruding on the marbled floor. In the mirror it is possible to detect the back of the canvas itself, complete with stretcher—but the painter appears to have been swamped by a wave of diffidence and at the crucial moment to have fled from the scene.

It is likely, but not certain, that Vermeer painted this picture in his own studio. Precisely similar leaded windows occur in at least five of his other works, and the same design with a coat-of-arms added in the centre appears in two more. On the other hand, in none of his other authenticated works do we meet quite the same patterning on the floor, nor the same Ruckers virginal, nor the puzzling picture hanging on the wall. It may be that he was in the habit of selecting the same room as a setting for his domestic scenes, but made imaginary alterations here and there in the architecture for the sake of variety. Just as he limits his choice of subject for genre to a few episodes chiefly connected with drinking, letter-writing, music-making, and the examination of jewels, so Vermeer rings the changes on very few studio accessories. His square-backed chairs with embossed nails and little lions as terminals, play a prominent part in more than half of his interiors; and the same Turkey carpet that covers the table of the Buckingham Palace picture (Fig. 12) occurs in the "Concert" of the Gardner Museum (Fig. 3). Similar mirrors form part of the décor of the Berlin "Pearl Necklace", the Widener "Weighing of pearls", and the "Woman asleep" in the Metropolitan, and the white earthenware jugs of the same type as ours are constantly repeated. The six-stringed viola da gamba (Fig. 13) reappears in the Gardner picture, and in the National Gallery "Lady seated at the virginals", and may well be the "bass viol" mentioned in the inventory of his property drawn up two months after his death.

As far as we know, Vermeer never strayed far from his native town of Delft,

but our knowledge is limited to the bare facts of his short life. He was born in Delft in 1632, and died there in 1675. At the end of 1653 he was admitted to the Guild of St. Luke, and was appointed syndic or headman of the Guild during the years 1662-3 and again from 1670 to 1671. That is almost all we know of interest about him. The oblivion that shrouded his personality for two hundred years has been sufficient to blot out any intimate details, beyond the fact that he married a certain Catherina Bolones, who bore him at least eight children. We can do no more than speculate on the pattern of his artistic training. From the age of fifteen or so, Vermeer must have been apprenticed to some local artist or artists for a period of six years before he became a master craftsman, and perhaps during the last of these six years he worked under Carel Fabritius, whose paintings he is known to have admired. He must also have had direct or indirect contact with the illusionistic seicento painting of Central Italy, and in the later 'fifties with the first genre pictures of Pieter de Hooch and Gabriel Metsu. Vermeer's "Procuress" in Dresden bears the precious date of 1656, and it would appear that shortly afterwards he began on the series of interiors of which the Royal picture furnishes so majestic an example. Various attempts have been made in the past to place Vermeer's works in their correct chronological sequence on the evidence of style and costume, but so far without success. This much is clear, that the picture in Buckingham Palace represents a moment in his development of perfect equilibrium, and must belong with the Gardner "Concert" to the period of his early maturity, perhaps soon after 1660.

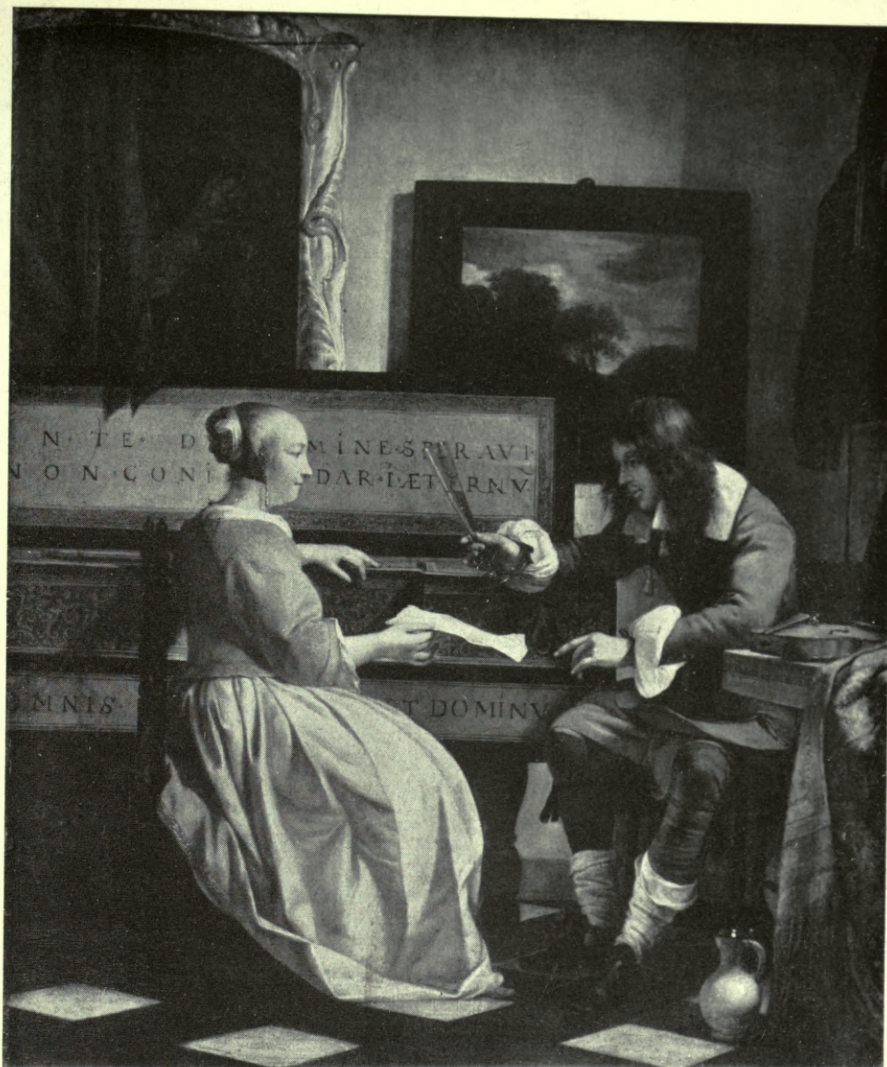
This equilibrium is the result of a fusion between jumble and orderliness, between the need to create an illusion of reality and the need to co-ordinate reality's disparate elements. Vermeer's picture is more than a mere catalogue of accurately transcribed studio properties; on the contrary his furniture is cast in a classical mould, like a plan of the town of Delft in his day, where the houses are variously designed according to individual preference within the limits set by a network of parallel streets. The eye comes to rest on the luminous surface of a back wall. This is set parallel to the spectator's field of vision and the objects in front of it overlap one another as hieratically as in any Cubist "collage". The top of the lady's head exactly coincides with the rim of the mirror and her dress assumes the classical structure of a fluted column (Fig. 7). Hemmed in between the lid of the virginal and the knife-edge of the picture-frame, the man is permitted no freedom of movement (Fig. 6). The realism of the jug is subordinated to an ideal of formal beauty. And even the foreground objects, for all their apparent disarray, seem united by the light that emanates



from a single source, and frozen in space by the mathematical precision of their outlines. Vermeer's is a calculated picture that only pretends to be casual. We detect in it a certain inevitability in the arrangement of surfaces in space, and we feel that by a surreptitious moving of a chair a little to the right or to the left, we shall sound a burglar alarm that will cause women to rush into the room tearing their hair in anguish at the spectacle of chaos. This was a short-lived and precarious classicism, the monopoly of Holland in the middle years of a Baroque century, that in the days of his youth affected the sentimental personality of Pieter de Hooch, and even for a time Terboch the vulgarian, and that drove Metsu to underline the inscription on his instrument with the wine in a glass (Fig. 5). After about 1670 the cup of naturalism was filled too full and in the hands of Vermeer's successors the Dutch genre picture became an incoherent documentary record of how men and women spent their leisure hours.

The earliest indication of the subsequent history of the Royal picture is in an anonymous sale at Amsterdam on May 16, 1696, of the works of Vermeer and others, in the catalogue of which the following entry is to be found. Translated from the Dutch, it runs: "No. 6. A young lady playing on the virginals in a room and a gentleman listening. 80 florins" (equivalent to about £6. 13s. 4d. in English money at that time). Some doubt has been cast on this identification, but without good cause. Though it is true that only twenty-one pictures by Vermeer were included in the sale, this number must represent more than a third of his total output; and though, even without the assistance of Han Van Meegeren, some hitherto undiscovered or unrecognised works may still turn up, it is unlikely that we shall ever meet with another answering precisely to this description. More use might have been made by students in this never-ending controversy of the relative prices charged for these pictures by the Amsterdam dealer. Though the prices may now strike us as ludicrously low, their relative value, depending on size and obvious importance, will not vary much from age to age. Thus there is good reason to suspect the identification of the Czernin picture with an item in the catalogue that reads: "Portrait of Vermeer", because only 45 florins are asked for it; whereas it seems reasonable that the price asked for the Vermeer in the Royal Collection, assuming it is indeed ours, should be a little above the average for all the Vermeers in the sale.

Once more we lose track of the picture and do not meet it again until it reappears most unexpectedly in a Venetian palazzo, the property of Joseph Smith, British Consul in Venice from 1740 to 1770. Smith assembled a strange assortment of contemporary and older masters, comprising over fifty of the



5 *Music Lesson*, by GABRIEL METSU  
Canvas: 15 × 12½ inches

National Gallery, London

finest Canalettos in the world, and room after room of decorative Zuccarellis and Sebastiano Riccis, as well as an extensive library of books and drawings. No rich Englishman can settle down in Venice for seventy years as he did without acquiring a streak here and there of eccentricity. Consul Smith was an eccentric to be sure; but that he was also a man of distinction is evidenced by his patronage of contemporary Venetian artists and his very personal taste. Horace Walpole maintained that Smith knew nothing of his library but the title pages, and in a letter of January 18, 1744, he reminds Horace Mann of a

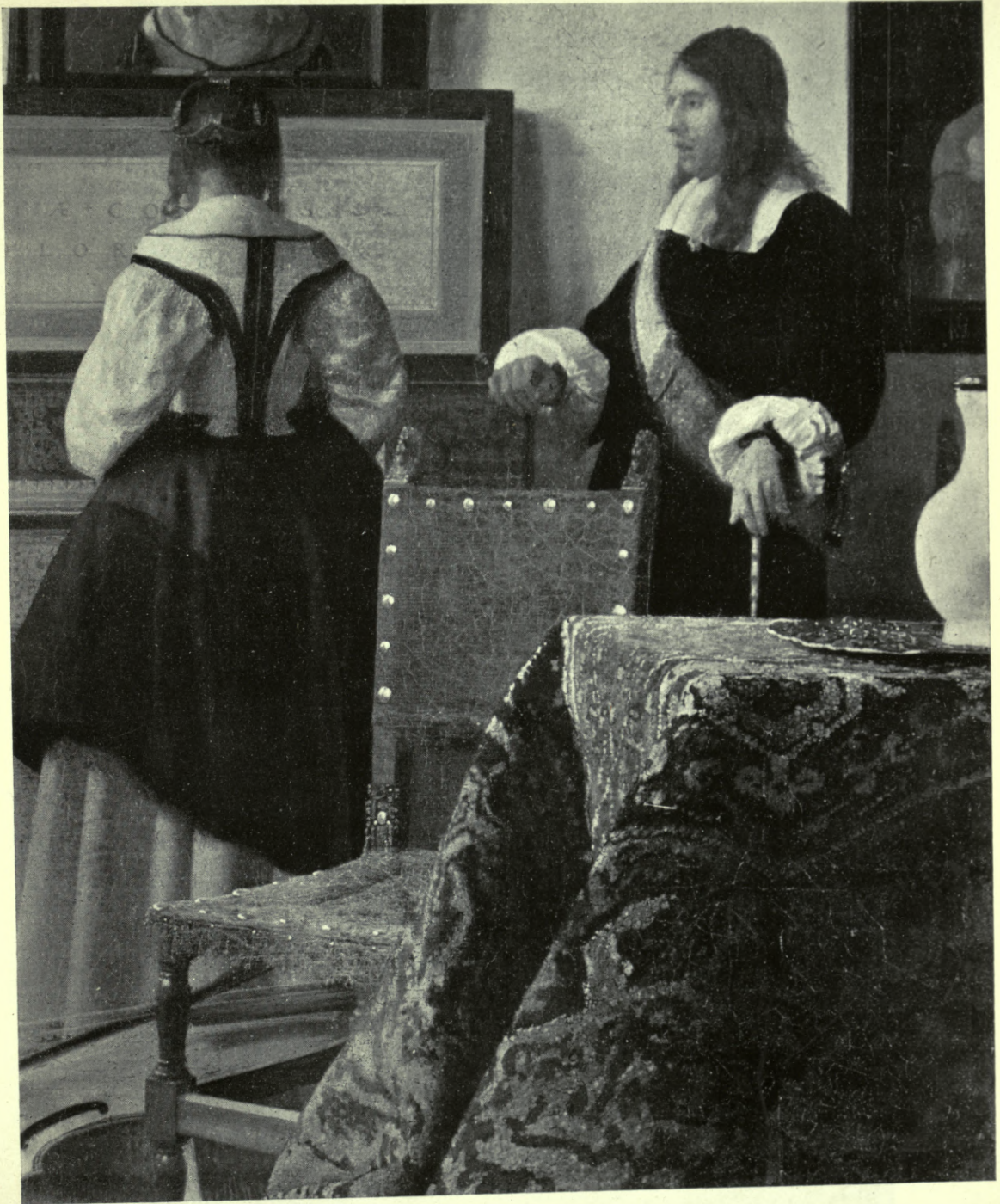


visit they once paid to the palazzo:—"Do you remember how angry he was when showing us a Guido, after pompous rooms full of Sebastian Riccis, which he had a mind to establish for capital pictures, you told him he had now made amends for all the rubbish he had showed us before?" Walpole must have remained unmoved by Vermeer—but is it too fantastic to imagine that the eye of Canaletto rested for an instant on the tiny blobs of white paint in the plate, these very blobs which form so surprising a feature of his own later productions?

Richard Dalton, King's librarian and general adviser on works of art, was commanded by George III to negotiate with Consul Smith for the acquisition of his pictures by the Crown; and in the summer of 1762 arrangements were complete for the purchase of his entire collection of art treasures for £20,000, including Vermeer's "Lady at the virginals", which must as it were have slipped in unobserved, because by this time the reputation of Vermeer had sunk, and the picture was masquerading under the name of the indifferent Dutch artist, Frans van Mieris. We may presume that at this time the signature was legible, but wrongly interpreted: the discrepancy between "Meer" and "Mieris" would have seemed trivial to an eighteenth-century art historian. Later, when the surface of the picture was heavily varnished, the signature became almost invisible, nor was it even recorded by the compilers of the catalogue of the Dutch Exhibition at Burlington House in 1929. So "Mieris" it was destined to remain, or sometimes "Meyris", or even "Moyris", depending on the accuracy of successive inventory clerks at Windsor, and once it appeared as an Eglon van der Neer, until the 1860's, when for the first time the correct attribution was put forward, just at the moment when the name of Johannes Vermeer of Delft was emerging from the shadows of two centuries.

During the last 180 years it has hung in Windsor or Buckingham Palace, except for a short visit to Kew, and recently six stormy years in some Welsh caves. It embarked on a modest career at Windsor as a furniture picture in the Queen's Dressing Room; later it graduated to the Corridor. In 1928 it was moved to Buckingham Palace and set in a place of honour among the Prince Regent's array of Dutch interiors. To George III, not exactly distinguished for his patronage of the arts, the Royal collection owes perhaps its most impressive single picture, capable of holding its own beside the Mantegnas in the Orangery at Hampton Court, the Raphael Cartoons, or any other monument of the Italian Renaissance with which Charles I sought to enhance his prestige.





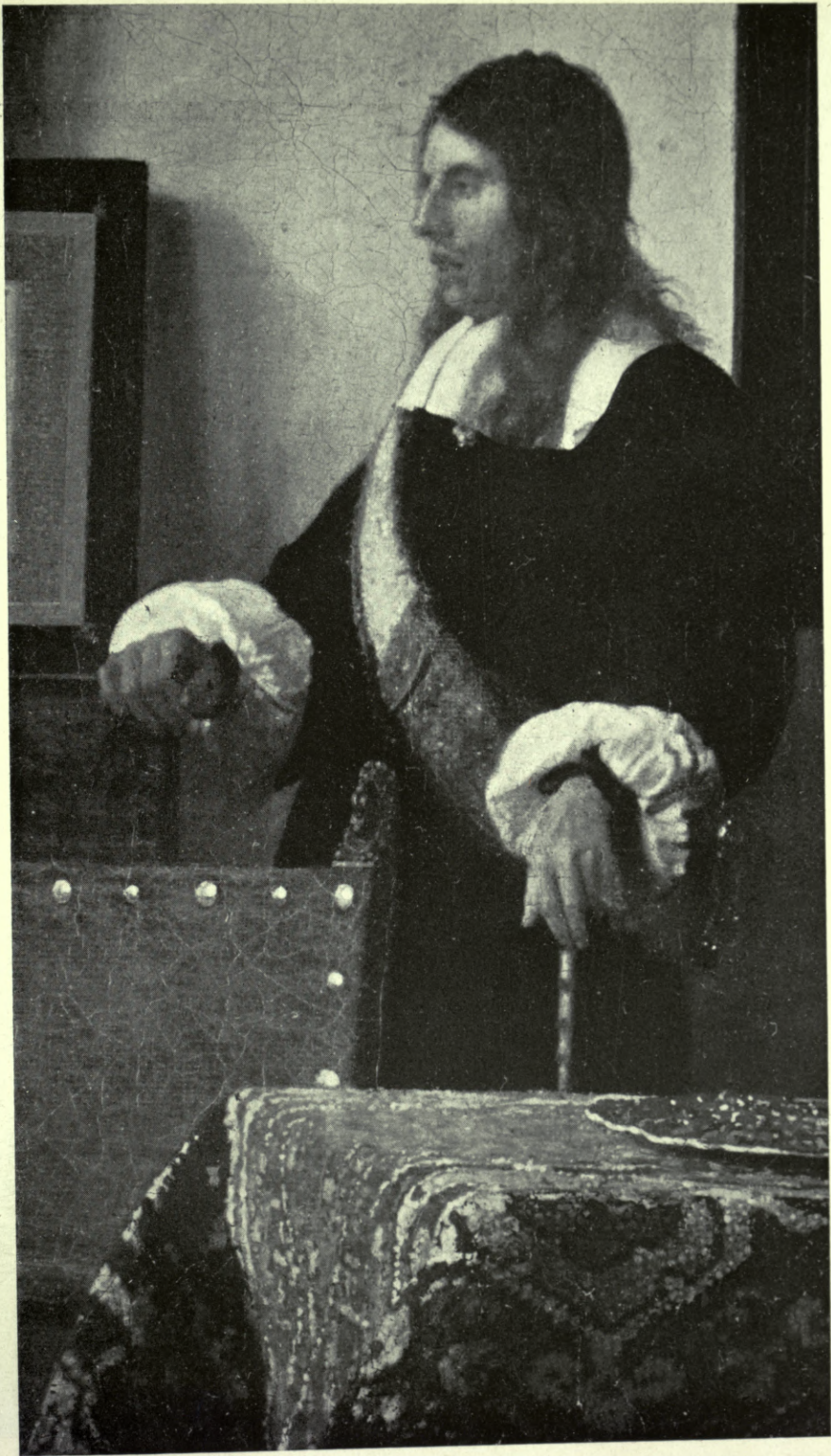
6 Detail of Vermeer's *Lady at the Virginals*





7 Detail of Vermeer's *Lady at the Virginals*





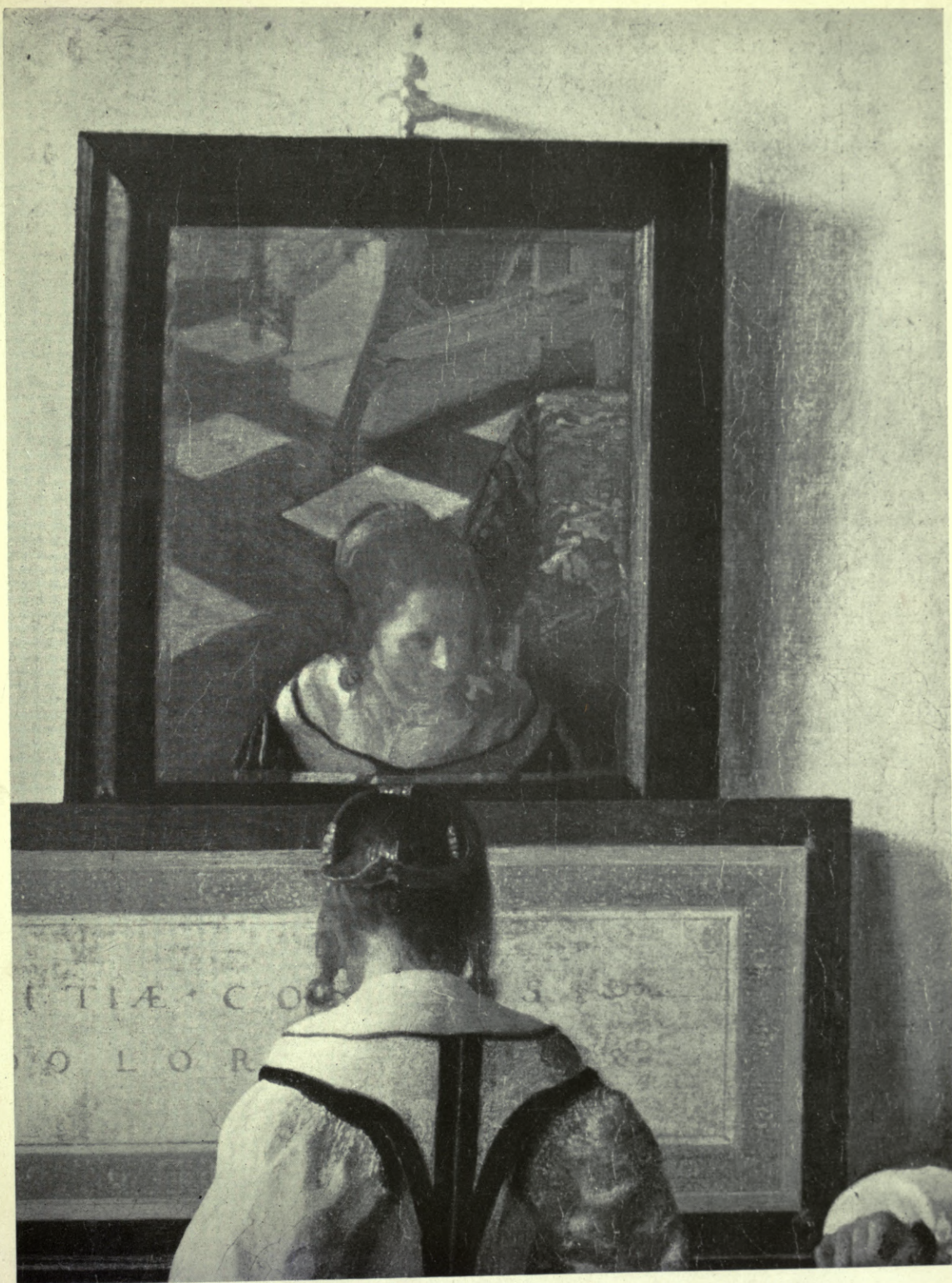
8 Detail of Vermeer's *Lady at the Virginals*





9 Detail of Vermeer's *Lady at the Virginals*





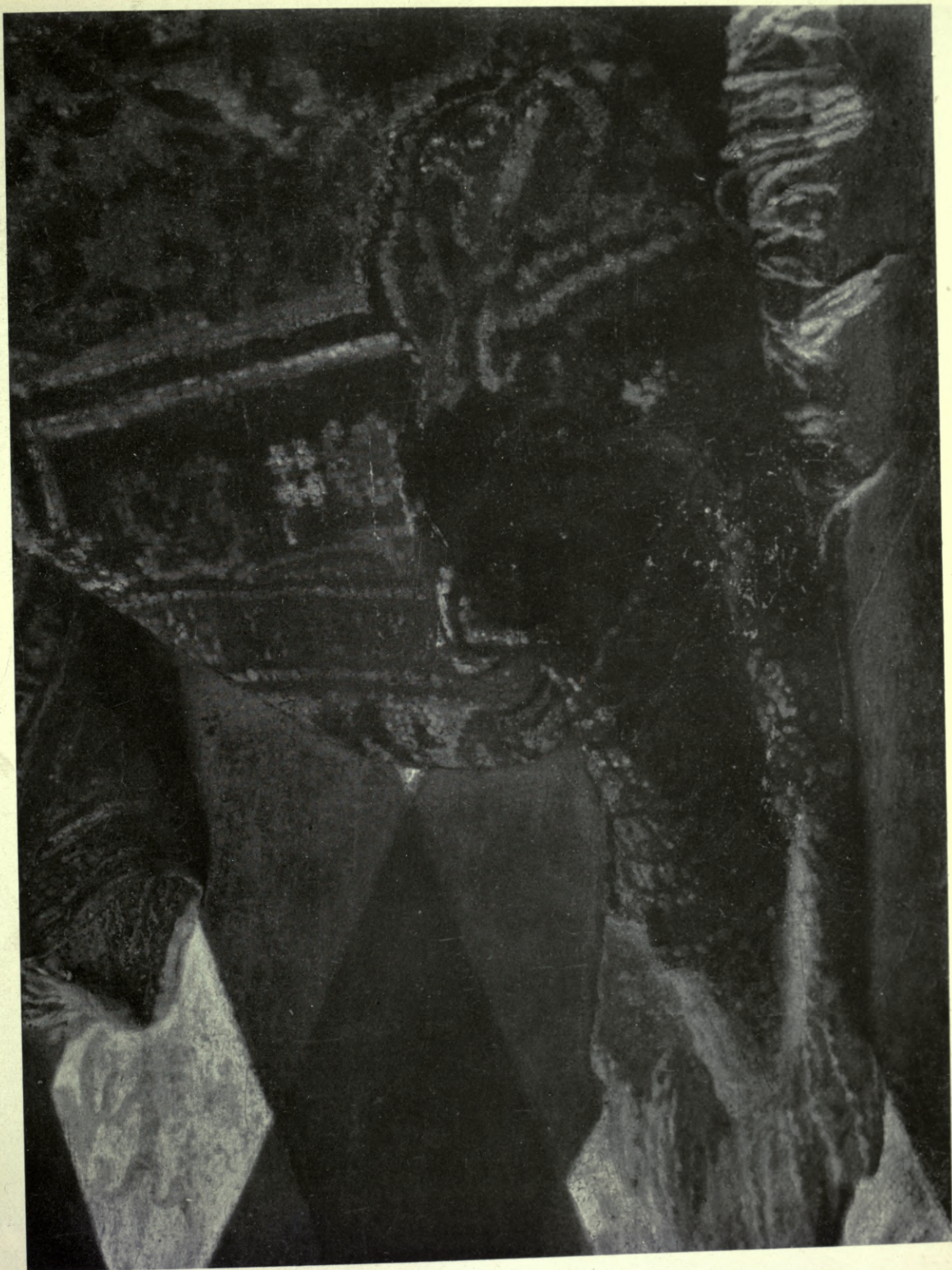
10 Detail of Vermeer's *Lady at the Virginals*





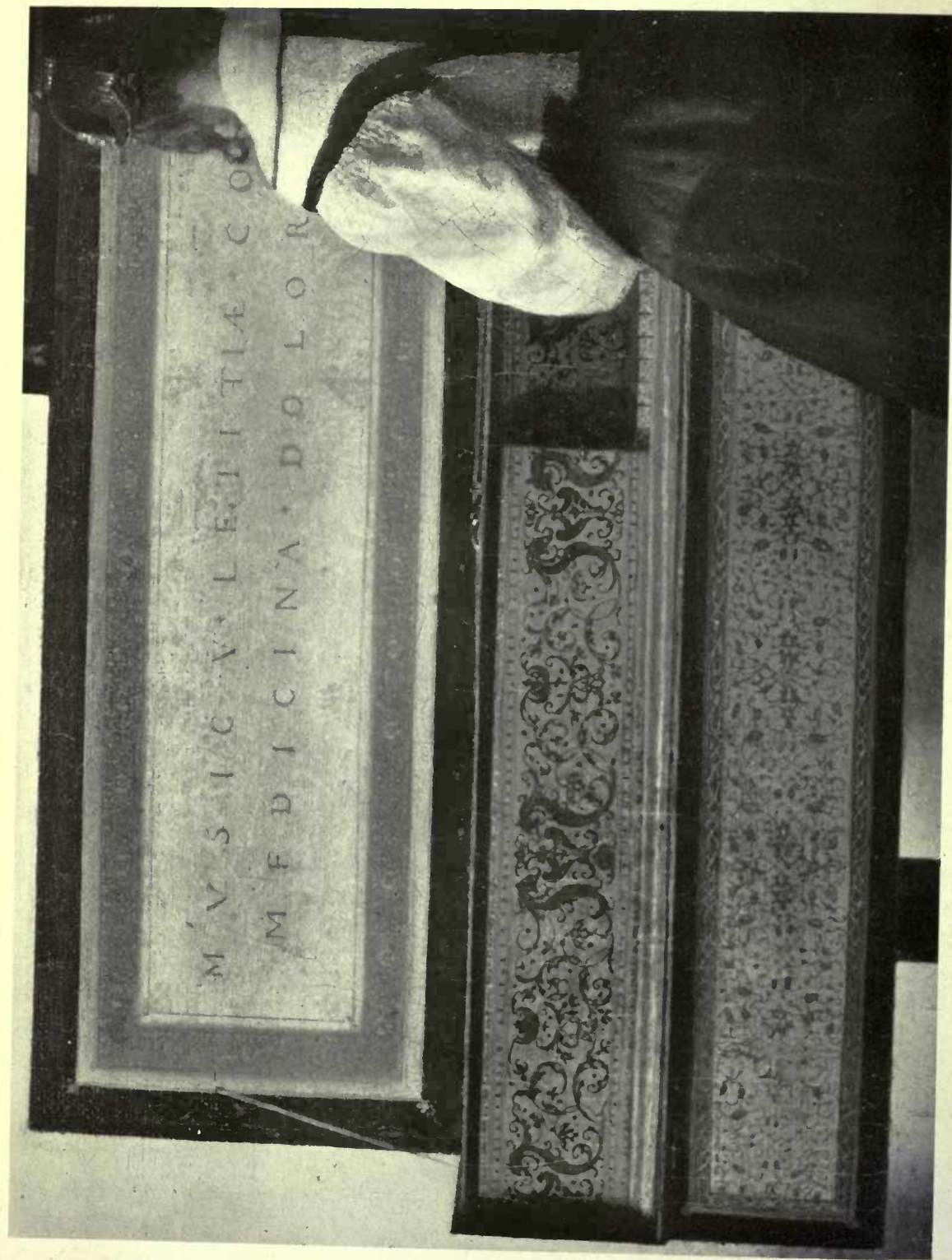
11 Detail of Vermeer's *Lady at the Virginals*





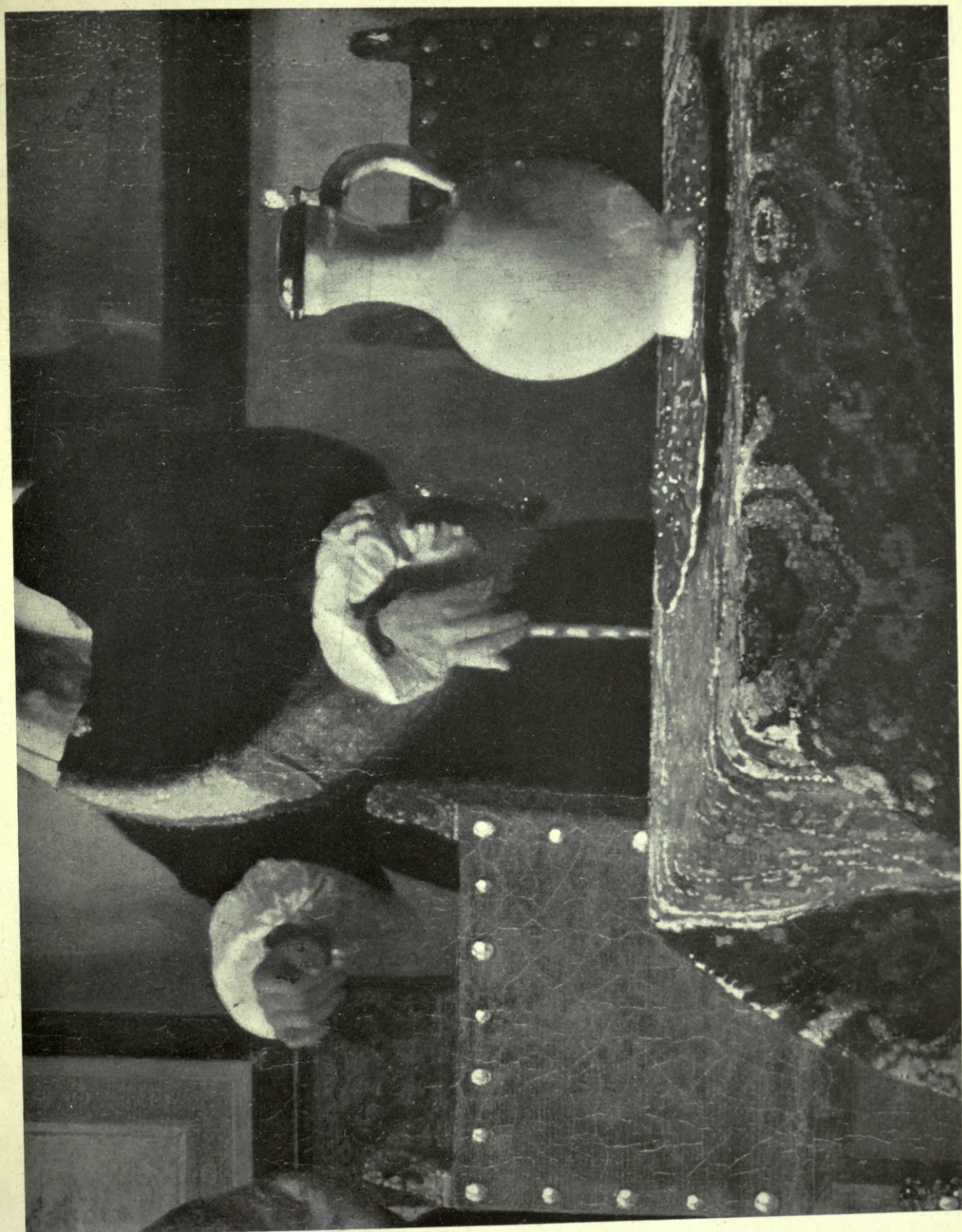
12 Detail of Vermeer's *Lady at the Virginals*





13 Detail of Vermeer's *Lady at the Virginals*





14 Detail of Vermeer's *Lady at the Virginals*





15 *Virginals*, by ANDRIES RUCKERS the elder

Musée Instrumental du Conservatoire, Brussels

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DAUMIER/LE WAGON DE TROISIEME CLASSE  
(in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)  
With an introduction by S. L. FAISON, JR.

BOTTICELLI/THE NATIVITY (in the National Gallery, London)  
With an introduction by JOHN POPE-HENNESSY

POUSSIN/THE GOLDEN CALF (in the National Gallery, London)  
With an introduction by ANTHONY BLUNT

JAN VAN EYCK/THE PORTRAITS OF JEAN ARNOLFINI AND JEANNE DE  
CHENANY, HIS WIFE (in the National Gallery, London)  
With an introduction by SIR ERIC MACLAGAN

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With an introduction by RAYMOND MORTIMER
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With an introduction by LEO VAN PUYVELDE
- RUBENS/THE CHÂTEAU DE STEEN (in the National Gallery, London)  
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- VERMEER/LADY AT THE VIRGINALS (in the Royal Collection, London)  
With an introduction by BENEDICT NICOLSON

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ND        Nicolson, Benedict  
653        Vermeer: Lady at the  
V5N5      virginals

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